

**David Elliott, *Rodchenko and the Arts of Revolutionary Russia*.
Toronto, Random House of Canada Limited, 1979. 136 pp., illus.,
\$20.00**

Robert McKaskell

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John A. Fraser, *Laurentian Splendour*, 1880. Oil on canvas, 48.9 cm × 95.3 cm. Ottawa, Galerie nationale du Canada.

forget that artists are living, breathing creatures and not machines. O'Brien's personality played an important part in the formation of the RCA and accounts of Charles Horetzky's difficult persona shed considerable light on his photographs.

This should not in any way suggest that Reid places undue emphasis on character traits. The art remains the primary evidence and Reid's analyses are incisive. At the same time, he is not afraid to suggest that an image is beautiful or extraordinary. Indeed it is a mark of the book that we are often aware of Reid's personal affinity for the images.

Extensive use has been made of contemporary documents and newspaper accounts throughout the book. These are particularly useful, revealing much about the mindset of these good Victorians and the sense of optimism and promise which pervaded the period.

Perhaps what is most significant about the book however is the consideration of the landscape photographers – Notman, Baltzly, Horetzky and Henderson. Reid rightly suggests that these men were the equals of the more celebrated painters both in their art and in the minds of their contemporaries. The significance of the Notman firm can hardly be underestimated and photographs by Henderson, in particular, are remarkably powerful works of art. Far from being unthinking, mechanical reproductions, they reveal a highly personal sensibility.

On the whole the book is highly enjoyable but the high quality of the text is not matched by the illustrations. Regrettably the only colour is the dustjacket and the reproductions in the book are often too small and occasionally fuzzy. The second lack is in the bibliography, something more extensive would have been much appreciated. This especially when even browsing through the book, one realizes that it is a synthesis of information from a dizzying variety of sources.

These points aside, the book is highly readable and, to this reader at least, exciting. Dennis Reid's contributions to our knowledge of Canadian art have, in the past, been notable and the present book is no exception. It should become essential reading for all students of Canadian art.

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DAVID ELLIOTT *Rodchenko and the Arts of Revolutionary Russia*. Toronto, Random House of Canada Limited, 1979. 136 pp., illus., \$20.00.

This book was originally published to coincide with the widely reviewed and consistently praised retrospective exhibition of Rodchenko's work organized by the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford in 1979. It contains an extensive photographic survey of the entire range of his work (including compass and ruler drawings, paintings, prints, sculptures, collages, photomontages, photographs, and designs for advertisements, book and magazine

covers and illustrations, posters, logos, furniture, clothing, a teapot and a stage set), as well as critical essays, documentary texts representing Rodchenko's and his colleagues' writing from 1919 to 1941, and the reminiscences of his family and former students. A supplement, listed in the contents to include a catalogue list, chronology and bibliography, was missing from the copy of the book I received to review.

Like other artists of the period, Rodchenko was initially dedicated to a search for the *new*. In 1915 he wrote to his artist wife, Varvara Stepanova, 'Yes, I have found something to paint and think that it will be new and daring. I shall free painting, even Futurist painting from what it has up until now slavishly clung to... I have found an entirely original path' (as quoted in Alexander Lavrentiev's contribution to the book, 'Alexander Rodchenko: An Introduction to His Work,' p. 28). In 1919, in his manifesto for the X State Exhibition Moscow, he wrote, 'The crushing of all 'isms' in paintings was for me the beginning of my resurrection... My work is to create new paintings... I am the inventor of new discoveries in painting' (p. 8).

By 1920 Rodchenko's statements reflect a change in his attitude. No longer was he satisfied simply to investigate new formal possibilities for painting and sculpture: his concern for an art that would serve society and its environment began to develop. His statement for the XIX State Exhibition Moscow read: 'Non-objective painting has left the Museums; non-objective painting is the street itself, the squares, the towns and the whole world. The art of the future will not be the cosy decoration of family homes. It will be just as indispensable as 48-storey skyscrapers, mighty bridges, wireless, aeronautics and submarines which will be transformed into art' (p. 8).

Having explored the formal properties of painting for the preceding six years, in 1921 Rodchenko exhibited three monochromatic canvases in the primary colours, following which he stopped painting for almost two decades. With Stepanova he wrote the Productivist Manifesto that year. It proclaimed the following slogans: '1. Down with art, long live technical

science. 2. Religion is a lie. Art is a lie. 3. Destroy the last remaining attachment of human thought to art. 4. Down with the conservation of artistic traditions. Long live the constructivist technician. 5. Down with art which only obscures the incompetence of the human race. 6. The collective art of today is constructive life' (p. 130).

The authors of two of the six critical essays in this book deal primarily with Rodchenko's painting and sculpture. John Milner, in his essay 'Material Values: Alexander Rodchenko and the end of Abstract Art,' offers a formal analysis of several of Rodchenko's works from 1918 to 1921, emphasizing their impersonal facture and his impersonal use of materials and forms. He relates the changes in the style of the works to the progression from composition (as seen in works by Malevich) to construction, which he sees as the undermining of pictorial conventions and the disregard for the concerns of aesthetics.

Whereas Milner presents Rodchenko's work as a progressive investigation of constructive elements, Andrei B. Nakov ('Stylistic Changes: Painting without a Referent') sees its essence, from 1913 to 1921, as being the 'radical alternation of successive phases' (p. 57). Without discussing specific works, Nakov presents each new series as being diametrically opposed to the preceding series. Because the analysis is very general, the argument is not convincingly presented, although study of the photographs in the book and knowledge of Rodchenko's conscious search for originality make his analysis seem more justifiable than Milner's more evolutionary approach.

Lavrentiev, the artist's grandson, introduces the whole body of Rodchenko's work, linking its various parts through his being a 'designer.' Design, Lavrentiev says, 'attempts to embrace and explain everything – including the development of our consciousness towards nature and ourselves' (p. 26). He goes further to state that for Rodchenko 'painting became a scientific and creative method of apprehending reality' (p. 26) and that in 1915 he 'single-mindedly and acutely directed his work toward the portrayal of everyday things' (p. 28). While I have no objection to linking Rodchenko's

various works through his facility for design, there is no suggestion in his writing or in the works before 1921 that he used painting to apprehend reality, even the metaphysical reality discussed by such artists as Mondrian or Gabo, or to portray everyday things. In fact, in 1921 he wrote that 'painting owes its whole evolution exclusively to form' (p. 128). It was his perception of painting as an art removed from reality that led him to abandon it. Lavrentiev works in the Department of History and Theory of Design at the Institute of Industrial Design in Moscow. Could his insistence on the consistent relationship of Rodchenko's art to reality be an attempt to counter the criticism of his formalism published during the Stalinist 1930s when Social Realism was being advanced as the officially accepted style of art in the USSR?

Szymon Bojko's essay, 'Productivist Life: Alexander Rodchenko as a Graphic Artist,' is another general introduction. He places Rodchenko's work in a broad art historical and social context, mentioning the influence of Beardsley, Cubism, Futurism, Suprematism and Constructivism, and relating the photomontages, typography, film posters and advertisements of the 1920s to the fervour of the search for a new future that followed the Revolution.

The remaining two essays discuss Rodchenko's work after 1921. Hubertus Gassner, in 'Analytical Sequences: Alexander Rodchenko's Photographic Method,' writes that Rodchenko's change from painting and sculpture to photography came about both because of the inner logic of his development as an artist and the discussion among artists and theoreticians about the need to develop a socially engaged art. He links Rodchenko's photomontages and photographs with the film of Dziga Vertov through their interest in machine-like movement. Rodchenko circles around his subject with his camera, taking different shots, 'tracing and composing varying and contrasting views' (p. 110), producing the 'analytical sequences' which Gassner considers more important than the better-known single photographs that are striking for their bird's-eye and worm's-eye views, or their oblique axes.

The longest essay in the book is Gail Harrison's 'Graphic Commitment: Alexander Rodchenko as a Book Designer.' Combining formal analysis with discussion of the iconography of Rodchenko's designs, she also uses a liberal number of quotations from Vladimir Mayakovsky's poetry and constructivist manifestoes that show the work within the context of social history.

Given the large number of typographical errors in this book, the varying translations from Russian of identical quotations, the lack of co-ordination of text and photographs, and the inconsistencies of its design, I assume it was hastily produced. German Karginov's *Rodchenko*, first published in Hungary in 1975 and published in Elizabeth Hoch's translation in 1979 by Thames and Hudson, is the most comprehensive treatment of Rodchenko's life and work to have appeared in English. Nevertheless, Elliott's book presents material not found in Karginov's and since its subject remains little known in the West, it will be useful to students of the modern period.

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WILLIAM M. VOELKLE (édit.) et CHARLES V. PASSELA (photographe) *The Pierpont Morgan Library: Masterpieces of Medieval Painting, The Art of Illumination*. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1980. 68 + xvii pp., 1200 illus. coul. sur 15 microfiches. \$195.00.

Dans le passé, les hommes ont parfois dépensé des énergies considérables à créer des œuvres d'art merveilleuses destinées à quelques rares privilégiés. On pense à quelques palais de princes musulmans, mais aussi à ces manuscrits du Moyen Âge occidental dont les pages étaient souvent ornées de décors, de scènes et de tableaux où la qualité du style rivalise avec la richesse des matériaux utilisés. Ces manuscrits ont été réservés au départ à des clercs ou à des mécènes. On ne peut les exposer que page par page et assez difficilement dans les musées ou bibliothèques. Cette matière était encore récemment assez peu couverte par l'enseignement.